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HORACE, PERSON AND POET

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I

Rotund, yet remarkable for slight stature among even a slight-statured race; his black hair more than evenly mingled with gray; the naturally dark and not too finely textured skin of face and expansive forehead deepened to vigorous brown by the friendly suns and breezes of both city and country; feature and eye holding the mirror up to a spirit quick to anger but plenteous in good-nature:

Corporis exigui, praecanum, solibus aptum,
Irasci celerem, tamen ut placabilis;—

altogether, a short, round man, smiling but serious, of no great refinement either of appearance or manner, with a look of the plain citizen—Horace is of all the ancients the least difficult to visualize.

He is gossip to elegant Maecenas in a carriage, or sits with him at the shows; enjoys with literary friends the hospitable shade of huge pine and white poplar on the sod of some rose-perfumed Italian garden with noisy fountain and hurrying stream; loiters, with eyes bent upon the pavement, along the Sacred Way, or struggles against the crowd on its way down town amid the dust and din of the busy city; shrugs his shoulders in good-humored despair at the sirocco, or sits huddled up and shivering with the tramontana in some village on the coast, reading and waiting for the first swallow to tell of the spring.

He plays a mild game of tennis on the Campus; delights at evening in bohemian excursions among the nameless *popolo basso*, and engages in small talk with dealers in small merchandise; looks in upon a party of carousing friends, with banter that is half reproof; is lionized in the homes of the first men of the city in peace and war, and mystifies the not too intellectual fair guests with graceful but provokingly unimpassioned gallantry; sits with

still greater enjoyment in the thick shade of his own arbor; appears in the midst of a household bustling with elaborate preparation for the birthday feast of a friend, or with more unrestrained joy welcomes at a less formal board the beloved comrade in arms of Philippi, prolonging the genial intercourse

Dum rediens fugat astra Phoebus—

Till Phoebus the red East unbars
And puts to rout the trembling stars.

Or, he rides an indifferent horse down the Appian Way toward the Alban Mount and dark green Algidus, or up the winding white road to sloping Tivoli, and beyond, along the banks of headlong Anio; stands in tunic-sleeves in the morning sun at his doorway on the Sabine farm, contemplating with thankful heart valley and hillside opposite, and cool Digentia below; rambles about the wooded uplands of his small estate, resting behind a rotting fane of the countryside to indite a letter to the friend whose absence seems for the moment the only ground in the world for anything less than perfect happiness; participates with the near-by villagers in the joys of the rural holiday; or mingles homely philosophy and fiction with rustic neighbors before his own hearth in the big living-room of the farm house.

Horace's place is not among the dim and uncertain figures of a hoary antiquity. Alter one or two details—give him an Italian mantle, modern shoes, and a walking-stick, instead of sandals and toga—and you may see him on the streets of almost any city of modern Italy. Nor is he less modern in bearing and character than in mere personal appearance: the same strange and seemingly contradictory blend of the grave and gay, the lively and severe, the constant and the mercurial, the austere and the trivial, the dignified and the careless, which is so baffling to the observer of Italian character and conduct today.

II

To see beneath this rather commonplace though engaging exterior and to understand how Horace came to be a great poet as well as a genial personality—to discern the spiritual Horace—requires somewhat greater effort.

Good poetry, like all other good art, has its foundations deep in vital experience. Art is the translation into visible or audible form of the emotional experience of men; a crystallization or precipitation of the spiritual element in human existence. The poet lives life abundantly. His own experience, together with the experience of his own race and his own time, are somehow fused and blended into a homogeneous whole, to which the divine gift—most mysterious of all factors in his make-up—inspires him to give beautiful expression.

For abundance of stirring and fertilizing experience, history presents few parallels to the times during which Horace lived. The days of his years fell in an age which was in continual travail with great and uncertain movement. Never has Fortune taken greater delight in her bitter and insolent game, never displayed greater pertinacity. In the period from Horace's birth in 65 B.C. to 8 B.C., when

Mourned of men and Muses nine
They laid him on the Esquiline,

there occurred the consulship of Cicero and the excitement of the Catilinarian movement; the coalition of Caesar, Crassus, and Pompeius; the exile of Cicero; the Gallic conquest; the defeat and death of Crassus at Carrhae; the defiance of the Senate by Caesar, and the civil war; the assassination of the dictator and the bloody measures of Antonius; the rise of Octavian, the overthrow of the Ciceronian party, and the cruel proscription under the second triumvirate; Philippi, the Perusine war, the tedious and uncertain struggle with Sextus Pompeius, and the long-drawn-out difficulties with the Antonians at home and abroad which were finally brought to an end at Actium; the slow in-gathering of power by Augustus into his own hands, and the employment by the ruler of all the friendly talent he could summon to his aid—whether civil, military, commercial, diplomatic, or aesthetic—in the vast and discouraging task of setting in order the house which for centuries had been gravitating into a state of more and more hopeless disorder.

We are at an immense distance, and the differences are now composed; the menacing murmur of trumpets—*minaci murmure cornuum*—is no longer audible, and the seas are no longer ruddy

with blood. The picture is old, and faded, and obscure, and leaves us cold, until we illumine it with the light of imagination. Then first we see, or feel, the immensity of the time: its hatreds and its selfishness; its differences of opinion, sometimes honest and sometimes dishonest, but always passionate; its division of friends and families; its lawlessness and violence, its terrifying uncertainties and adventurous plunges; its tragedies of confiscation, murder, fire, proscription, feud, insurrection, riot, war; the dramatic exits of the leading actors in the play—of Catiline at Pistoria, Crassus at Carrhae, Clodius at Bovillae, Pompeius in Egypt, Cato in Africa, Caesar, Servius Sulpicius, Marcellus, Trebonius and Dolabella, Hirtius and Pansa, Decimus Brutus, the Ciceros, Brutus and Cassius, Sextus Pompeius, Antony and Cleopatra—as one after another

Strutted and fretted his hour upon the stage
And then was heard no more.

It is with some such background as this that Horace's invocation to Fortune should be read—the goddess who could change the triumphal chariot to the funeral car:

O diva, gratum quae regis Antium,
Praesens vel imo tollere de gradu
Mortale corpus vel superbos
Vertere funeribus triumphos;

and that other exquisite expression of the inscrutable uncertainty of life:

Fortuna, saevo laeta negotio et
Ludum insolentem ludere pertinax,
Transmutat incertos honores,
Nunc mihi, nunc alii benigna.

There is nothing here of the idle singer of an empty day. The poet's utterance may be a universal, but it is no commonplace. It is one of the eloquent records of the life of Rome in an age which for intensity is unparalleled in the history of the city.

And yet many men live a longer span of years than fell to the lot of Horace, and in times no less pregnant with event, without coming into really intimate contact with many sides of life.

It was not so with Horace. His experience was comprehensive: he touched the life of his generation at many points. Born in a small country town in a province distant from the capital; his father at one time a slave, and always of humble spirit and calling; educated at first among the sons of the "great" centurions who constituted *the* society of Venusia; ambitiously taken to Rome to acquire the accomplishments usual among even the sons of senators; the constant companion of a sympathetic father of robust common-sense and exemplary character; finally sent to Athens, garner of the wisdom of the ages, where the learning of the past was constantly revived by teachers possessing the quick Athenian spirit of telling or hearing new things—his intellectual experience was of the broadest. Into it there entered and blended the shrewd practical understanding of the Italian *bourgeoisie*; the ornamental accomplishments of middle- and upper-class training; the inspiration of Rome's history, with its long line of heroic figures; broadening first-hand knowledge of prominent men of action and letters; unceasing discussion of questions of the day which insisted on being considered, and by everybody; and, finally, humanizing contact on their own soil with Greek poetry and philosophy, Greek monuments and history, and with teachers who were racial as well as intellectual descendants of the greatest people of the past. All this no doubt could have fallen, and did fall, to the portion of many a young man of greater apparent promise than Horace. Most of it did fall, for example, to the portion of young Marcus Cicero, whom he may have known at Athens.

But Horace's experience assumes still greater proportions: he passes from the university of Athens to the greater university of life. The death of Caesar and the arrival at Athens of an idealized Brutus stir his young blood. He joins the army of the liberators, is made a commissioned officer, feels the hardship of the tedious campaign, and enriches his life with new friendships formed under such circumstances as have for all time cemented the friendly bond; sees the disastrous day of Philippi, narrowly escapes death by shipwreck, and returns to Rome to find himself alone, without father or fortune.

Then an interval of diminishing bitterness, during which his

philosophic mind is no doubt busy with reflection upon the disparity between the ideals of the liberators and the results of their actions, upon the difference between the disorganized Rome of the civil war and the gradually knitting Rome of Augustus, and upon the futility of presuming to judge of the righteousness of either motives or means in a world where men, to say nothing of understanding each other, cannot understand themselves—and he accepts the inevitable.

He goes farther than acquiescence. The growing national conviction that Augustus is the hope of Rome finds lodgment in his mind also. He gravitates from negative to positive. He even applies for and obtains that in every age much-coveted boon of the young Italian, a government position—salary, safety, perfect respectability, a considerable dignity, and a degree of leisure.

He makes wise use of the leisure. Still in the after-glow of his Athenian experience, he writes, and attracts attention among a limited circle of associates; the personal qualities which made him favorite with the leaders of the republican army serve him well here also; he wins the recognition and the favor of men who have the ear of those higher up; an appreciative statesman, prompted by a politic ruler, makes him independent of money-getting, and gives him currency among the foremost literary men of the city. He triumphs over the social prejudice against the son of a freedman, disarms literary jealousy, and is assured of both favor and fame.

Nor was Horace's experience with the world of action here at an end. If his actual participation in civil and military life did cease with the gift of the Sabine estate, and if he never pretended *in propria persona* to live the life of the highborn and wealthy, he nevertheless associated on intimate terms with men through whom he felt all the activities and ideals of the class which was most representative of the national life, and his past experience and natural adaptability enabled him to assimilate their life.

Thanks to the glowing personal nature of Horace's works—there are few of them not addressed to men with whom he was on terms of more than ordinary friendship—we may know who many of these friends and patrons were who so enlarged his vision and contributed to his inspiration. They were rare men—fit audience,

though few—men of experience in affairs at home and in the field, men of natural taste and real cultivation, of broad and sane views, of deep sympathies and warm heart. There was Virgil, the half of Horace's own spirit; there were Plotius, and Varius, bird of Maeonian song, whom he ranked with the singer of the *Aeneid* himself as the most resplendently pure of souls on earth; there was Quintilius, wept by many good men—when would incorruptible Faith and Truth ever find his equal?—there was Maecenas, worldly-wise and cultivated, the pillar and ornament of his fortunes; Septimius, the hoped-for companion of his mellow old age in the little corner of earth that smiled on him beyond all others; Iccius, procurator of Agrippa's estates in Sicily, sharing Horace's delight in philosophy; Trebatius, sometime friend of Cicero and Caesar, with dry legal humor seasoned in the wilds of Gaul; Pompeius and Corvinus, old soldier friends with whom he exchanged reminiscences of the hard campaign; Julius Florus, and other members of the ambitious literary cohort in the train of Tiberius; Aristius Fuscus, the watch of whose wit was ever wound and ready to strike; Agrippa, grave hero of battles and diplomacy; and Augustus himself, the busy administrator of a world, who still found time for letters.

It is through the medium of such personalities as these that Horace's message was delivered to the world of his time, and to the later generations of the world of literature. In how great part the finished elegance of his expression is due to their discriminating taste, and how much of the breadth and sanity of his content is due to their vigor of character and cosmopolitan culture, may be only conjectured. It takes two to beget art; the responsive audience is hardly less indispensable than the inspiration of the poet.

Such were the variety and abundance of Horace's life experience. It was large and human. He had touched life high and low, bond and free, public and private, military and civil, provincial and urban, Hellenic, Asiatic, and Italian, in the country and in the city, ideal and practical, at the cultured court and among the ignorant multitude.

If plentiful experience, however, were all that entered into the making of poets, there would have been many Horaces instead of one, rare as Horace's life really was in breadth and depth. But abundance of men possessed of experience as wide have died without being poets, or even wise men. Their experience was held in solution, so to speak, and failed to precipitate.

Horace's experience did precipitate, Nature gave him the warm and responsive soul that made it possible for him to become part of all he met. Unlike most of his associates among the upper classes to which he rose, his sympathy could include the freedman, the rustic, and the common soldier; unlike most of the common people from whom he sprang, he could extend his sympathy to the careworn rich and the troubled autocrat. He had learned from experience and observation that no life was wholly happy; that the cares of the so-called fortunate were only different from, not less real than, those of the ordinary man; that every human heart had its chamber furnished forth for the entertainment of *Atra Cura*, and was never without its guest.

But not even the precipitate of experience called wisdom will alone make the poet. Horace was endowed by nature with another and a rarer gift—the sense of artistic expression. How much he owed to inspiration, how much to his own laborious patience, and how much to the good fortune of large experience is as impossible of calculation as in the case of most other poets. His heart is surely to be classed among those which have come into the world pregnant with celestial fire. The poet *is* born. We may account for the poetic faculty in Horace by the attribution of Hellenic descent (as if Italy had never begotten poets of her own), but the mystery remains. Remove from his case, or that of any other real poet, every influence of purely mundane character, and there is always a residuum which can be accounted for only on the ground of native talent—*vis insita*. It was the possession of this which set Horace apart from other men of apparently similar experience.

Of this setting apart Horace is thoroughly conscious. He is aware of a power not himself that makes for poetic achievement, and realizes all the mystery of inspiration. Melpomene cast upon

him at birth her placid glance; he expects glory neither on the field nor in the course, but looks to song for his triumphs. To Apollo, lord of the enchanting shell,

Parent of sweet and solemn-breathing airs,

who can give power of song even unto dumb fishes, he owes all his inspiration:

O testudinis aureae
Dulcem quae strepitum, Pieri, temperas,
O mutis quoque piscibus
Donatura cycni, si libeat, sonum,
Totum muneris hoc tuist,
Quod monstror digito praetereuntium
Romanae fidicen lyrae;
Quod spiro et placeo, si placeo, tuumst.

Not that poetic genius is merely an accident of birth. Horace is perfectly cognizant of the fact that poets are born *and* made, and condemns the folly of depending upon inspiration unaided. What nature begins, cultivation must develop. Neither training without the rich vein of natural endowment, nor native talent without cultivation, will suffice to make the poet; the two are friendly conspirators in the process. He who would run with success the race that is set before him must endure from boyhood up the hardships of heat and cold, and abstain from love and wine. For himself, Horace is the bee of Matinum, flitting with honeyed thigh about the banks of moist Tibur. He is aware of inspiration, but believes in supplementing it with the file, with long waiting, and conscious intellectual cultivation. Wisdom is the principal thing:

Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons.

III

Wisdom has died with many men because they have been unable to give it enduring expression. Others, fewer in number, might have waked to ecstasy the living lyre, but were barren of a message. In his harmonious wedding of human content with dignified and beautiful expression, Horace is one of the world's best illustrations of the unity of life and letters.